



ELSAH HISTORY

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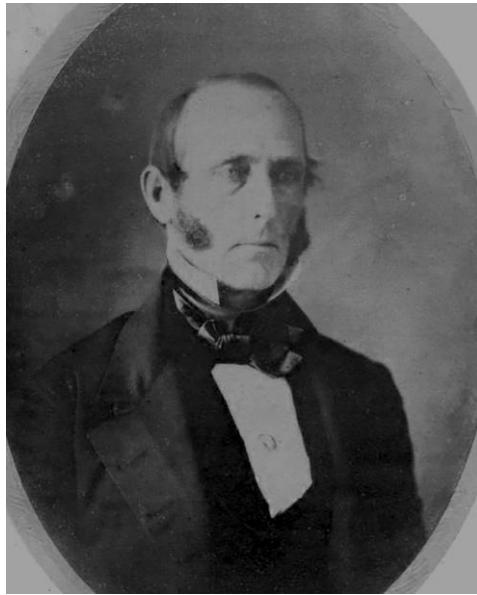
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The Semples of Elsah: Part I, 1851-1860

By George Provenzano, PhD

This article is the first of three about the lives of James and Mary Semple, their children, and other family members in Elsah in the years before the Civil War. Parts II and III will deal with their days in Elsah during the Civil War and then the years of Reconstruction to 1876.



James and Mary Semple Portraits, circa 1850s. Courtesy of Village of Elsah Museum; donated by Rick Rydgren, great grandson of Eugene Semple, son of James Semple.

In 1851, James Semple (1798-1866), his wife Mary (1806-1875), their four daughters, son, and several house servants settled in the woods of southeastern Jersey County near the majestic limestone bluffs that hug the Illinois side of the Mississippi River. General Semple (his rank in the Illinois Militia from the Black Hawk War) initially purchased less than 200 acres in a narrow valley that extended back from the river at a break between the bluffs. A few cabins and steamboat refueling stop known as Jersey Landing occupied the waterfront at the mouth of the valley.

The following year, Semple, who had been appointed postmaster for Jersey Landing, laid out streets and lots for a village in the valley. He named the village Elsah, after the prominent Ailsa Craig Rock that sits in the middle of the outermost reach of Firth of Clyde at its junction with the

Irish Sea. The Semple family cherished the image of this imposing island as being the last bit of Scotland their ancestors saw from the ship that brought them to Virginia in the 1750s.

In newspaper ads, Semple extolled the benefits of Elsah's healthy environment, economic opportunities and exquisite beauty. To encourage settlers to build homes in the village, he offered free lots to anyone who promised to build a structure using stone mined in his quarry. To educate the children of the village, he built a stone schoolhouse, which still stands.

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Elsah Schoolhouse (built 1857) is the present Civic Center.

Semple and three business partners sought to expedite shipment of raw and processed farm commodities from the Illinois hinterland to St. Louis – a thriving business in the mid-1850s.

Toward this end, they reopened a dormant horse boat ferry that crossed the Mississippi and made an easy connection with another ferry that crossed the Missouri River beyond. The two rivers are only about four miles apart at Elsah. From the Missouri crossing, travelers going to St. Louis had access to McAdam and plank roads, the most advanced forms of highway construction of the day. The successful operation of the ferry drew in others who constructed and operated a flour mill, distillery and warehouse on the Elsah waterfront.

Over time Semple increased his land holdings to several thousand acres of farmland in the rolling highlands above Elsah. The land afforded him a modest income from sharecropping with grain farmers and orchardists who raised corn, wheat, apples and grapes. To organize and manage his diverse businesses, Semple and his wife established the Elsah Building and Manufacturing Company. Mary Semple may have been one of the first women directors of an Illinois business.

For the family residence, Semple built a rambling one and one-half story home he called “Trevue.” His children mockingly called it the “Semple Mansion.” It was located to the northwest, about 1.5 miles up one of the wooded ravines that winds out from Elsah. The Semple parents appreciated the privacy of a country estate setting. They also wanted to avoid living near the river because of its association with contagious diseases such as cholera, smallpox and ague (malaria). No trace of the family home remains today.

James Semple was born in Kentucky. In 1828, he left that state for good to settle in Illinois. In 1833, he married Mary Stevenson Cairns Mizner, the daughter of Dr. Caldwell Cairns, a delegate to the Illinois Constitutional Convention in 1818. The marriage was the second for each; James’ first wife died in 1821, a little more than one year after they wed and without issue. Mary’s first husband died in 1829, leaving her with a son, Lansing, age 4, and a daughter, Isabela, less than one. Semple raised his stepchildren as his own.

In the first years of marriage, the couple resided in Edwardsville. Two daughters: Ada and Lucy



'Tree View' Farm Residence of the late Gen. Jas. Semple Sec. 18 Township 6 Range 11 Jersey Co. Ills.
Atlas Map of Jersey County, Illinois. Davenport, Iowa : Andreas, Lyter, & Co., 1872.

were born there in 1834 and 1836, respectively. During this time, Semple was elected to three consecutive terms as state representative from Madison County. His fellow representatives elected him house speaker for two terms.

In 1837, the family moved to Alton just months before the U.S. economy descended into a severe depression. To prop up his finances, Semple accepted an appointment by President Martin Van Buren as diplomatic chargé d'affaires to New Granada (now Colombia and Panama), South America. Semple took Mary and the children with him, and while living in the capital, Bogotá, their son Eugene was born in 1840. The Semples returned to Alton in 1842 where their last child, Julia, was born in 1848. During this period, Semple served briefly on the Illinois Supreme Court and then in the U.S. Senate (1843-47). However, his disillusionment with politics led him to end his political career. Stepson Lansing Mizner lived with the family in Alton, fought in the Mexican War, came home to finish college and left Alton for California in 1849. From Alton, the family moved to Vandalia briefly before moving to Jersey County.

James Semple was 54 and Mary was 46 when they settled in Jersey County. In the vernacular of the day, they were ‘coming into a good age.’ Semple was a man of southern habit; he used tobacco, drank whiskey, and kept hunting dogs. Although he preferred living in a country setting, his children, who were now young adults and teenagers, were drawn to the excitement of big city living in St. Louis. By year’s-end 1860, nine years since coming to Jersey County, all of the children except Julia would complete their basic education, and three daughters would marry and move away from Trevue.

Stepdaughter Isabela (Belle or Bel) Mizner was the first to wed. She married Charles (Charley) Floyd-Jones at Trevue on June 15, 1853. Charles was from Long Island, New York. He attended Union College in New York City and graduated with a degree in civil engineering in 1836. During the Civil War, Charles worked as division engineer on the Illinois Central Railroad. The couple resided in Vandalia and Springfield before returning to Trevue after the war to assist Isabela’s aging mother.



Trevue - Semple family home, 1892. Courtesy of University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, on permanent loan to Principia Archives, Elsah, IL

The following year on Christmas Day, Ada married Napoleon Mulliken at Trevue. Napoleon was born in Illinois but grew up and was educated in St. Louis. He worked his way up from being a clerk to becoming one of the owners of the Keokuk Packet Company, a steamboat line that provided daily service between St. Louis, Alton and Keokuk, Iowa, with stops at Elsah along the way.

The newlyweds lived in St. Louis, initially in rooms in the well-furnished and most comfortable Barnum’s St. Louis Hotel. Ada gave birth to the

first Semple grandchild, a son named Lansing, in 1855. Ada's health was frail growing up. She died just two weeks before her 24th birthday in April 1858 in St. Louis. James and Mary raised Lansing, who was also of poor health. He died in Elsah in 1861. Both Ada and Lansing were initially buried in a family cemetery at Trevue. The death of his first grandson greatly saddened General Semple, who afterward spent hours sitting near the boy's grave. Napoleon remarried but remained very close to his in-laws for the rest of his life.

Lucy Semple was 24 when, on June 5, 1860, she married Edgar Ames of St. Louis at Trevue. Edgar was a well-educated, sophisticated easterner, whose family moved from Cincinnati to St. Louis in 1840. Edgar and his older brother Henry were leading business executives who owned a large and very profitable beef and pork packing house. The brothers were also officers in several St. Louis financial institutions. In the 1860 census, Edgar reported owning real estate and personal property totaling over \$600,000, an extraordinarily large amount of wealth for the day. Lucy and Edgar Ames resided in St. Louis, but Lucy made frequent trips to Elsah to look in on her parents.

In making a transition to the next installment, it is convenient to end this Part 1 with a little

Myth Debunked

Newspaper allegations that General Semple moved to Jersey County because the government planned to extend the National Road from Vandalia, Illinois, to the Mississippi River near Elsah were without merit. Land speculators likely made these claims to cause the value of land near the road to explode. Semple never had anything to do with this myth.

Construction on the National Road from Cumberland, Maryland, to Vandalia ceased in 1840 when Congress failed to approve necessary funding. Surveyors had laid out a route for the road to continue from Vandalia to Alton in 1827. The Illinois General Assembly endorsed this option in 1836, and Semple gave it his support in the U.S. Senate in 1847 when he tried unsuccessfully to encourage Congress to complete the road to the Mississippi River. Semple never considered any other course than building the road to Alton. In 1927, the National Road was designated as U.S. Highway 40 and was subsequently completed from Vandalia to St. Louis. General Semple would have objected.

background about the house servants who came with the Semples to Jersey County. The U.S. Census for 1850 shows that just before they moved, the Semples had three servants who were African-American and, likely, siblings: Mary Burns, age 16; Ruth Burns, age 14; and James Burns, age 10. Because James Semple's parents owned slaves in Kentucky, the question naturally arises: Were these adolescents his slaves? The answer is complex; part of it is presented here and part in the next installment.

Over forty years later in 1894, one of the then servants, Ruth née Burns Stanton, provided some details about her upbringing in the Semple family in an interview for

The St. Louis Post Dispatch. Stanton told the reporter she had been born in Madison County, Illinois, to parents who were free. She continued, "...but I was bound out (meaning indentured) to Gen. Semple's family, for my mother used to belong to them." In her words, Ruth Burns became indentured because her mother had been a slave to the Semple family in Kentucky.

The circumstances Stanton described were legal under the Illinois Constitution until 1848. Semple was entitled to keep his former slave's children in indentured servitude until age 18 for females and

age 21 for males, as long as they were registered in conformity with the law with the county clerk. But Stanton did not indicate if she had been born before or after her mother had been freed; she probably did not know. If born after, Stanton could have been indentured until age 18 under an 1826 Illinois law called the Act Respecting Apprentices with the same outcome of having to serve Semple until age 18. In either case, like many others in his position, Semple failed to file the necessary paperwork with the proper authorities. If he did, it has yet to be found. Ruth

Dr. George Provenzano is an economist with over 50 years of experience in research and teaching in academia, including at the University of Illinois, Urbana; the U.S. government's Environmental Protection Agency; and Battelle Memorial Institute in the private sector. Since retiring in 2006, he has engaged in extensive research and speaking on the local history of Riverbend.

Stanton regarded herself as indentured to General Semple. She was most likely unaware of the formalities of indenture regulations.

We leave the Semples in 1860 as the country was on the verge of the Civil War. After nine years in Elsah, the couple was prospering, thanks to their quarry, farming and other enterprises, living in a lavish home with servants, watching their family grow as their daughters married, and mourning the tragic early loss of one of their daughters and grandson.

Elsah Weathers 70 Days of Stay-at-Home

By Cecily Lee

In an effort to document Elsah history in the making, we occasionally run articles on current events having a significant impact on the Village. The information here is as of the end of May.

Elsah residents have experienced an abrupt lifestyle change this spring, a collective slowing down -- as if life in the Village needed to slow down any further! Ironically, it all started on the first day of spring just as folks were dusting off their hiking boots to venture outdoors. The catalyst was a stay-at-home order issued by Illinois Gov. J. B. Pritzker, designed to counteract the spread of the novel coronavirus, a.k.a. COVID-19. The unprecedented measure was taken in light of the global pandemic's severe impact on both health and the economy – to date over 100,000 lives lost



and some 42 million seeking unemployment compensation in the US alone.

From that memorable March 21st there would follow 70 days of collective effort to figure out how life worked under the “new normal.” A glimmer of hope of normalization (the old version) finally appeared on May 29 when the Governor advanced the state from Phase 1 - “Rapid Spread,” to Phase 3 - “Recovery” of a five-phase plan dubbed “Restore Illinois.”

Made possible by Illinois’ meeting various medical and capacity benchmarks, this move signifies a cautious “reopening” of the state.

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Inge Mack

A Personal Remembrance

By Devon McNamara



Painting of Inge in her youth. Photo courtesy of Jeanine Shaner.

The portrait that hung for so many years in her living room on Palm Street greeted friends and family at Farley's Music Hall on a snowy afternoon, January 12th of this year, as they celebrated the

life of Ingeborg Maria Berthe Hötte Mack, one of Elsah's most beloved citizens. It was a gathering that included readings from Scripture, "Live Forever" sung by Larry Groce, a beautiful film of family images from 1930's Europe up to the present in Elsah, created by her son Glenn and her grandson Harlan, and remembrances from friends of decades in the Village where she had lived with her family since 1958.

Her gifts to the Village have been many and long lasting. Perhaps still among the most familiar is the founding of Historic Elsah Foundation itself, a labor of love that began with the modest but influential *Elsah Guide Book*, the work of Drs. Charles Hosmer and Paul Williams, professors of American History and American Literature at Principia College, and evolved with her guidance into the organization that achieved National Historic Register status for the entire Village in 1973. Inge held every HEF office several times over and edited and wrote many a Historic Elsah Newsletter, her special Flood of 1993 commemorative being a classic. Her leadership

and inspiration in the Village, including serving on the Zoning Board, were widely recognized.

Yet another gift was her role in establishing The Elsah Landing, with her husband Alfred E. Mack, and Dorothy Lindgren of Principia. Helen Crafton, a gifted baker, joined the enterprise within a month, and within a year the charming restaurant on LaSalle Street was featured in *Where to Eat in America*. Offering nourishing European recipes from Inge's own family and hearty grinders characteristic of Al Mack's former home in upstate Connecticut, it was both down-to-earth and beautiful -- fresh flowers on every table and enjoyed by local and St. Louis customers, students from all over, and travelers heading up and down the River Road.

As if the Prather building's transformation into The Elsah Landing weren't enough, Al Mack restored what remained of the Spatz Filling Station, and it became The Maybeck Gallery, Inge Mack curator, artist's agent, guiding spirit, hostess. She featured the work of local, national and international artists as well as crafts people, Candy Nartonis, Duncan Martin, Jim Richmond, Carolyn Lord, Glenn Felch, Jim Schmidt, Belgian



Sons Eric and Glenn Mack with Inge on a woodland hike.

artist Sabine de Coune, work from Salamandra Glass, Portsmouth, N. H., raku potter Nancy Meeker, jewelry and sculpture by Judy Felch, selected gem stones from the collection of Geology professors Drs. Percival and Forbes Robertson (father and son), just to name a few. The openings were well-advertised and attended area events, the small but well-proportioned space alive with gracious good company and the surprise and pleasure of exceptional artwork simply and beautifully presented in a familiar setting.

Inge's diligent and delighted support of Village businesses from Jeremiah's Elsah, the Elsah Café, its fabled predecessor Keller's Store, to Blair Smith's Elsah General Store, was rooted in her sense of the joy and vitality of community. Dutch hospitality overflowed with the spirit of good times on Palm Street. Her Christmas tree, alight with candles in the European tradition, was always graced with the angel ornament that



Inge preparing Russian tea cookies. Cookies, photo, recipe, and notes were sent to family and friends at Easter, 2019. Courtesy of Jeanine Shaner.



Inge on lounging vacation with style.

greeted her very first Christmas in Indonesia in 1921. But any time of year, Dutch soups, her famous Linzer Torte, sometimes a Russian pashka for Easter, German potato salad, and Al Mack's signature spaghetti sauce, all kept guests enjoying convivial meals. But even more they loved the long conversations, stories, laughter, music (jazz and Schubert, Argentinian tangos, Portuguese fados, French chanteuses) as friends, folks from the College, sometimes visiting artists –

pianists, dancers, lecturers -- family from Holland, students of all ages, stayed up late talking politics and history, discussing what's happening in education, the latest films, and the latest fashions as well.

Ever aware of fashion's verve and swerve, Inge joked that she herself "followed Chanel," though in fact whatever she wore was, to use one of her own expressions, "pulled together," whether a coat designed by her gifted sister Kathe in Amsterdam, or a pair of borrowed slacks from one of her sons, perfect for standing on the sink so she could paint the kitchen trim, or photograph the artichokes cooking for dinner from above.

She was always an artist, with pencil, paint, canvas and sketchbook, as well as with her Leica, or Rolleiflex. Grandson Harlan, multi-disciplinary artist, sculptor, blacksmith, who spent long periods of his childhood in Elsah, has been in many ways a soul mate, and Inge viewed the screen shots of his latest work at the International Steel Sculpture Art Festival in China last year with deep satisfaction. Harlan is now family archivist and custodian of her rich personal

library of art, dance, history, and philosophy, and her years of family archives meticulously assembled. But Harlan and the rest of the family have long understood the ways in which Inge was an artist with people, bringing everyone together, encouraging life's adventures and meaningful developments with spirit and imagination. "Why don't you DO that?!" she would say, during a discussion on that legendary back porch where so many life plans evolved.

Some of her own life plans took shape on that porch as well, whether they resulted in renting a farmhouse on a lumber estate in Belgium for a year -- Battle of the Bulge territory -- taking her grandchildren to Europe, or, and Jeralyn Hosmer Lewitz will remember this, driving to Chicago just for the day to see the George Caleb Bingham exhibit -- "Fur Traders Descending the Missouri" -- at the Art Museum, then driving back to Elsah, five hours each way and a good dinner included. And in fact, many an evening spent in Elsah, looking at slides or home movies after an air-conditioned summer supper when no one was travelling anywhere in the Mississippi River Valley heat, was a way of life, on true home ground. And when building and restoration was happening, the builders always got a seriously hearty lunch at her table -- Tom Perotka's enjoyment of those occasions was well known even beyond the Village.

Inge had good friends among many generations, from Elsah, Alton, St. Louis, New York, points west, or abroad, who were inspired by life changing late night discussions in her kitchen. She would say, "Well, the war started on my eighteenth birthday," just for perspective. Then you would hear of young German boys during the occupation of her country in the train station in Amsterdam, coming back from the Russian front, or maybe how she met her American husband Al,



Alfred and Inge Mack, circa. 1945.

in 1944, bivouacked with his men in her family's garden in the south of Holland near the border, or maybe how she completed her college degree at Goddard, in Vermont, where surely she surprised her young fellow students, with her insight, her lively mind and talent, buoyant energy and humor, although that's not what she focused on. Instead you'd hear about husbanding your own talent, believing in yourself, paying attention to details that reveal everyone's worthiest yearnings including your own.

Inge often said she was really a listener more than a story-teller. Al Mack had war stories and then some, and it's a fact that of his entire company in the Signal Corps during WW II he never lost a man. But Inge said of herself that she was an observer. "I want to taste life," she would say, "to enjoy it, to understand." So she was ever an enthusiastic promoter, of Eric's sojourn at INSEAD, the international business school in France, Glenn's independent film *Brujo*, Sun Smith-Forêt's innovative textile work and Village movie nights, Ned and Paula Bradley's international adventures and home projects over the years, including the Alton Little Theater and their illustrious Christmas Night revels, of her own family's summers and winters (!) in Vermont where they built a house of 19th century logs from

Calhoun County, and always of every bake sale and serious historic transaction that made Elsah unique in the region, even in the United States.

Her sense of the meaning of civilization itself as expressed in a nation's life was intense. As a keen and sensitive observer who had lived through the war in Europe, she possessed an artist's and sometimes a librarian's, even an archivist's, attention to detail. She kept records of world events, photo essays in *Life* of American moments from VE day to the moon landing to Nixon's visit to China, *Vogue* magazines, which she insisted offered important perspectives on subtle changes in society, essays by those savvy anonymous writers for *The Economist*, art series from *The Christian Science Monitor*, book reviews from *The Wall Street Journal*, articles on the Balkans after Tito, along with Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. She also kept a wonderful photo collection of movie stars, admired by her 17-year-old self, right when the world seemed to be falling apart, with special attention to Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, the young Tyrone Power, Loretta Young, and Annabella, in Suez, 1938.

Inge read Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and thought it a work of genius about family life. She considered *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* by Mary Baker Eddy a work of spiritual genius. When she gave Glenn, *Guns, Germs and Steel – The Fate of Human Societies* by Jared Diamond, there was a lively debate over Dutch bean soup, vermicelli, and Mrs. Smith's apple pie from Schnuck's about where the United States was heading. Or was it granddaughter Katie Mack's special vegetarian Christmas soup? Inge gave Eric the autobiography of Joseph C. Harsch, the *Monitor's* Washington Bureau Chief whom she admired, as she did its Editor, Erwin Canham, especially for his leadership during the upheavals of the 1960's.

At Inge's house you always felt the vibrancy of life itself, right on the spot in Elsah and also somehow at the same time your connection with the world, a connection she always enlivened. When she worked in the College library she took Colin Campbell's Modern Poetry course not only for the contemporary beat of its American language but for its insight into American artists as bellwethers of shifts in a country's ethos. She loved Kenneth Clark's PBS series, "Civilization – a Personal View" for the way he showed human history written in the book of its art. With Eric's daughter Nelleke, now an artist herself, she watched "Everwood," the life-in-a-small-town series. She enjoyed Doc Martin with Elsah friend Donna Burnett Bonnel and Lorli Nelson of Alton, and with Lorli, Inge always delighted in the New Year's Day broadcasts from the Vienna Philharmonic, which she recalled from her childhood, as did Lorli who was Viennese. Of course she watched "Downton Abbey" with everyone else and, for sheer silliness and fun, "French Kiss," (Kevin Kline and Meg Ryan) multiple times with me. She savored the scene where Meg Ryan meets her future French family



Glenn and Katharina Mack sharing a porch swing with Inge.
under the trees at a large informal gathering in their vineyard.

Inge's was a large family and still is, grandchildren and great grandchildren in Chicago

and St. Louis, Vermont and Florida, nieces and nephews in Australia and Greece and Holland. She rejoiced in the return of Nolen

Joyce
Robertson
Provenzano,

her niece by marriage, who grew up in the Village, to a home on the Alton bluffs, scene of many a holiday Mack-Robertson family gathering. And granddaughter Ginger Mack Emden remembers Inge's story of being on the Elsah election board, driving the votes to Jerseyville after the poll closed in the Village, feeling her American citizenship at work in a real democracy. Elsah was the American family. She loved the land by the river, its wild wide sweep, still so full of possibility, at the edge of the west, still the heart of a young country.

Everyone who knew her will tell you Inge Mack was a great walker. I used to see her striding down the back road from campus for lunch when she worked in the library, and later, when I was teaching, renting the apartment in the barn the family built behind the house, we took long walks up to the top of the bluffs and along a wide path to the fields above Chautauqua. Elsah friends would walk with her to Eliestoun, or out toward the Grafton Road.



Inge, her mother Kathe Luise, and younger brother Hans on their porch in Java, Indonesia.



Inge on vacation in Vermont.

She loved walking in the Village in spring and in snow, photographing its many looks and changes and atmospheres, the pear trees next to Lucy McDow's, river fog on Palm Street, a branch of redbud in a window vase, dinner guests at The Landing, reflected through large paned windows, on an autumn evening, or Sun's porch at Riverview alight as you turned in from the river. A well traveled, well read, deep thinking woman, she was also simplicity itself. "Exercise class? Just walk up Palm Street to the Picnic Grounds, look at the river from up there – it's ideal – then enjoy the walk back down, run a comb through your hair, and you're ready for the day." A no-nonsense recipe for life.

One recent Christmas her brother in law and nephew visited from The Netherlands. We had all seen Glenn's movie, in which his cousin Emma, a dancer, plays the part of a dancer. Rutger, Inge's nephew, was describing the way Emma moved. "Her dancing was just part of her," he said. "It was . . . effortless." Though it can never be the whole story for any human being, this word still describes how Inge Mack always seemed to move among us, sharing the gifts of life, strong and beautiful, generous, vibrant, visionary, . . . effortless.

Devon McNamara, a graduate of Principia College and former faculty, currently teaches English and Irish Literature at West Virginia Wesleyan College, directs undergraduate and graduate abroads in Ireland, and is on the MFA Low Residency – Creative Writing faculty. She first met Inge Mack on a walk in the Village in 1959.

Unless otherwise noted, photographs are used with permission from Glenn, Harlan, and Katie Mack, the Mack family album, Devon McNamara and those who loved Inge.

Elsah Weathers... Continued from p. 5

After the prohibition of in-person socializing under stay-at-home (or “shelter-in-place” as it is also known), the possibility of finally gathering together, albeit in groups of no more than 10, feels like a welcome breath of fresh air. Similarly, businesses and locales that have hung on by a thread to survive the 70-day shutdown are heaving a sigh of relief that they can now reopen -- with the provisos, of course, of reduced numbers of people in their spaces, social distancing, use of face coverings and sanitization. Retail, manufacturing, offices, state parks, youth sports, day camps and gyms fall in this group.

Illinois’s understandable caution about reopening was due to its third-place ranking of states with the most confirmed cases of COVID-19 -- behind New York and New Jersey. Neighboring Missouri has had just one tenth as many cases as Illinois. Statewide, Southern Illinois has seen far fewer cases than the hard-hit Chicago area, the one place excluded from advancing to Phase 3. And locally, the Jersey County Health Department has reported a low figure of 20 confirmed cases, of which five remain active, 14 are recovered, and one resulted in decease.



Elsah's Fountain Square Park, May 2020. Photograph by Melody Hauf-Belden.

Back to March. “We would like to thank everyone for your generous spirit and resilience as we work together as a community



Hannah Cravens, Postal clerk and Chief Cheerer-Upper.

to get through this health crisis. This is a time to demonstrate the best of who we are.” So commented Mayor Mike Pitchford as he and the Village Trustees followed the Governor’s lead by closing retail shops and lodging in Elsah until further notice. Soon after came the shutdown of the Civic Center, the Village Museum and Fountain Square Park. Even the public restrooms were locked in an attempt to dissuade visitors from coming to town. While necessary, this was a 180-degree flip from Elsah’s long-standing efforts to attract visitors.

Essential services such as police patrol, trash removal and Post Office remained intact. Working from behind a large plexiglass protective sheet, Postal clerk Hannah has seen a spike in the volume of packages mailed and received. “For some people, coming to get their mail is their one outing of the day. One woman told me she dresses just for this,” she observed. It seems her job description has expanded to include Chief Cheerer-Upper.

Village residents appeared to take the situation under Phase 1 in stride, generally staying upbeat. One resident made brown paper bag treats of fresh fruit for neighbors, commenting, “I believe that in times like this, there is the opportunity to do acts of kindness, little things for each other. That can be contagious in a good way.” Others have made a point of calling friends who are living alone,



doing errands for those who can't get out, or volunteering to pull weeds in Village green spaces. Several said the slowdown has given them more time for reflection, which they value. Mayor Pitchford cited another positive unintended consequence: "A lot of us have not been kept up to date on changes in technology, and this is forcing us to learn to manage distance communication." With haircuts on hold, residents are just cheerfully letting their hair hang down.

People have dealt with their need for food, as well as elusive commodities like toilet paper, in creative ways, ranging from whittling down well-stocked pantries to trying new recipes to buying occasional take-out. Fortunately, Elsah's two local food businesses have stepped up to meet the Village's culinary needs. Elsah General Store has provided convenient and safe individualized curbside delivery by appointment. "Village residents appreciated the ability to pick up needed essentials each week, without the drive to a crowded grocery store in Alton," noted owner Blair Smith. Three Rivers Community Farm up the road put out an online offer of 400 plants to its clientele, which quickly sold out, and they have been selling fresh produce. Aldi's and Schnucks in Alton initiated home delivery for Elsah during this time, after years of requests for this from Villagers. But some residents preferred to make the trip into town themselves, mask-clad, standing in line while their grocery cart was sanitized – perhaps for the novelty of being "out and about."

Other businesses in town, the shops and especially the B & Bs, have taken a financial blow during the prime time sales season. The combination of no revenue and continuing expenses of utilities, property taxes and insurance, with no end in sight,

continues to be challenging. Connie Davis, owner of The Green Tree Inn, said, "The only way I keep my mind off worrying is by taking care of our grandchildren during the week; it's hard work but such a joy! When we come home on the weekends, I spend it combing through the Internet searching for solutions like special funding for small businesses." Maple Leaf Cottages owner Deborah Smith says philosophically, "It's a bump in the road financially and it's tough, but it's not even comparable to losing someone. We take it one day at a time. Money comes and goes, and we'll survive."



Curbside delivery at the General Store, May 2020. Photograph by Melody Hauf-Belden.

The impact on the Village's budget is uncertain, according to Trustee Tim Eckels, Finance Committee Chair, who stated, "We expect the Village will face fiscal tightening under almost any scenario.

We are hopeful that we can get through this crisis with a combination of cautious spending early in the fiscal year, prudent service cutbacks later in the year as needed, and adequate financial reserves."

During Phase 1 those walking or bike riding for exercise and enjoyment – Villagers and occasional visitors – were observed doing so either alone or in nuclear family groups. Neighbors conversed across the street and friends exchanged crossed arm hugs. When groups of two or three friends walked "together," they generally

observed the *de rigueur* six-foot separation termed “social distancing” which, as one TV commentator observed, is more accurately described as “physical distancing.” Face coverings or masks were not much in evidence in the Village, except in transactional conversations.

Residents with professional jobs and volunteer commitments have gone “remote,” working from home as best they could. Principia College professors and Elsah residents Charters, Martin, Miller, Rhaesa and Snow taught all their classes online. Boards met remotely too. One resident shifted her adult literacy tutoring to Facetime mode. “Zoom” became a household word. Internet and cellular usage soared, causing some unwanted blips in service. Internet provider Wisper performed an upgrade in response to the increase in demand.

With schools closed for the rest of the school year, third-grader Village resident Samuel does his work at home in the morning using packets he and his mom pick up from Grafton Elementary. “I don’t really like not being in school because I can’t play with my friends,” he commented wistfully.

But he has adapted. On a rainy afternoon, he was building a base to hold a new train set as part of a family project. Otherwise, he is outside, racing down the sidewalk on his scooter or bike, skirting pedestrians, chatting with an adult neighbor or finding and returning someone’s lost cat.

And what about disruptions to residents’ typical activities? The Methodist Church had to close its doors but encouraged members to stay in touch

virtually and to contact Pastor Abert for any needs. The Christian Science church is using Zoom to host its Sunday and Wednesday services and Sunday School with Readers Tom Fuller and Heidi Snow presenting from their own homes. Elsah Book Group members continue to “meet,” also through Zoom. The Village’s April Spring Festival had to be cancelled, while the town’s iconic HEF-sponsored Hosmer-Williams lectures have had to be postponed until Fall.



*Elsah's neighborly 3rd grader, Samuel.
Courtesy of Mary Marvin Odhiambo.*

On the upside, Nature has gotten a welcome respite from high carbon emissions with a phenomenal 8% reduction worldwide reported. In the village, people are tending to their gardens with zest. Under Jeff DePew’s expert direction, Elsah’s Wetlands Project along the creek accomplished the removal of some non-wetlands plant species, sculpting of the landscape and planting of 55 young flood-friendly trees and 400 smaller plants. When a late May flash flood took out many new plantings, volunteers were out the next day, undaunted, looking for three lost trees and retying the deer fences. (Watch for an article on this project in our Fall issue.)

From the east bluff, the Principia College Chapel chimes continue to mark the quarter hours. But most everything else changed. Just before spring break Interim President John Williams announced that students should plan not to return after break. Professors got an extra week to convert their classes to remote mode, and the whole community went virtual. Access to the physical campus was restricted to essential workers and to 55 students, mainly international, who were unable to go

home. Weekly virtual “town meetings” during the semester have provided a forum for discussion of issues, including how to forge community in a virtual learning context.

The walk across the stage for 2020 graduates of the College was postponed to Homecoming Weekend in October. All summer activities at the College, including Summer Session, Police Youth Camp, Gold and Blue Athletic Club use of athletic and library facilities have been put on hold. No decision has yet been announced on how Fall term instruction will be delivered.



Jeff and Linda outside their new shop in Elsah. Photograph by Melody Hauf-Belden.

It remains unclear how much and how quickly Elsah residents will choose to utilize the services now available under Phase 3. If Elsah General Store’s May 30 re-opening is an indicator, there is enthusiasm for getting back to the good ole days. It is clear that despite uncertainty,

financial sacrifice, limited social interaction, separation from extended family, and a host of other changes, Elsah residents have managed to weather the 70-day “stay-at-home” period. They may even have garnered a few gems from this forced interlude of quietude.

Dr. Cecily Lee is former Associate Professor of Spanish at Principia College. She currently serves on the HEF Board and the editing team of this Newsletter.

Historic Elsah Foundation News

Update on Farley Music Hall Restoration

The flood of 2019 left Historic Elsah Foundation with the major task of restoring Farley Music Hall. As reported, the largest part of the work was in replacing the beautiful pine floor and wainscoting along the walls.



Board members, Jane Pfeifer, Jeff Cornelius, and George Provenzano took the lead on this project, which was completed in October of 2019, and the result is spectacular.



However, several smaller projects remained to be completed in order to preserve and maintain the original beauty and function of this 1887 building. Over the last six months, all of the doors have been adjusted and repaired, and the front exterior door was re-installed to open outward, making it handicap-accessible. The bathroom siding was replaced, and the walls and ceiling painted. Floor molding was replaced in the main room, kitchen and bathroom, then given a coat of stain. The kitchen window was adjusted and repaired, and the exterior band boards and doors are now freshly

painted. Many thanks to Jane Pfeifer for her leadership in this important restoration work, and to L & L Painting - Eric Lambert Contractor, and to Jason Roloff of Roloff Painting, Inc.

Home for the Holidays

On December 7th, 2019, Historic Elsah Foundation hosted its annual Home for the Holidays House Tour, welcoming over 600 people, who enjoyed a beautiful day in the village and the opportunity to tour several of Elsah's historic homes. Two horse-drawn carriages clip-clopped their way through the village, as guests visited twelve private homes, the museum, old schoolhouse, the two churches, the bed & breakfast inns, and the village shops.

Tour visitors were given a 16-page tour booklet, which listed each building, along with a brief historical sketch and a photo. The booklet was expertly designed by HEF Board Member Jon Hosmer, and the printing was contributed by Principia College, for which we are very grateful.

Save the date... Home for the Holidays is an annual event on the first Saturday of December. This year the event is scheduled for Saturday, December 5th. Tickets for the 2020 Home for the Holidays House Tour go on sale October 15th, and are \$18 in advance, or \$20 at the door. For more information, check our website at www.historicelsah.org.



2020 Elsah Museum Photography Exhibit

The Elsah Museum's spring opening normally features its annual photography exhibit - a display of all the contest entries. The exhibit theme this year is "My Favorite Window" and all submissions for the contest were received by March 16th. Unfortunately, the "shelter-at-home" order began before our judge could determine the winning photographs. While our normal reception and activities are on hold, we do expect to judge the photographs and determine the winners of the purchase prizes and other special recognition soon. If the Museum does not open this summer, we hope to make a virtual tour available for our participants and visitors.

Elsah Museum Temporarily Closed

The Illinois "shelter-at-home" order and the closing of non-essential businesses meant that the Elsah Museum missed its April 4th opening date and will remain closed until the order is lifted. Keep an eye on our website for updated information (www.historicelsah.org).

Hosmer-Williams Lecture Series

The Illinois "shelter-at-home" order has also curtailed the very popular Hosmer-Williams Lecture Series, resulting in the postponement of two of the four historical talks scheduled for 2020. We hope these lectures can be rescheduled in the near future, but we are waiting until new guidelines are issued by the State of Illinois for meetings of large groups.

The next two lectures, still scheduled, are planned for Thursday, September 17th at 7:30, and Thursday, November 12th, at 7:30. Both will be held at Farley's. The first will be given by James Fuller, Professor of History at University of

Indianapolis. His lecture is titled, "The Lady Major and the War Governor: Belle Reynolds and Richard Yates, and the Politics of a Civil War Sex Scandal." The second lecture is by Ian Hunt, Chief of Acquisitions, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois. The topic is "Rediscovering Lincoln's Bible - A Gift from the Ladies of the Philadelphia Volunteer Hospital Association."

HEF Board Member George Provenzano does a masterful job planning the Hosmer-Williams Lecture Series each year. In light of the pandemic, George is working now to offer a lecture which can be accessed and viewed remotely by audiences anywhere. To stay up to date on new developments regarding the Hosmer-Williams Lecture Series, please check the HEF website: www.historicelsah.org

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The purpose of Historic Elsah Foundation as stated in the articles of incorporation (1971) is "...preservation and enhancement of the historic buildings, architecture, and culture of the Village of Elsah, Illinois, and the establishment of an educational program to inform the general public of the historical and educational values of the Village."

